ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1-D

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Mikhail's track record

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After watching Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's performance during his first year on the world stage and reading his five-hour harangue to the 27th Party Congress, the Soviet experts in the State Department and the Kremlin-watchers in the intelligence community share a common perception of his strengths and limitations.

To date on the domestic front, the new general secretary has shown himself to be a hard-driving and ruthless personnel manager with the capacity to fire the corrupt and the incompetent and the determination to impose discipline and sobriety on the work force. As the American intelligence agencies have pointed out in a recent economic report to Congress, the result during 1985 in Russia has been "a marked decrease in absenteeism and increased productivity overall."

But a one-time marginal improvement in productivity as the consequence of stricter work discipline is not going to transform the pervasive stagnation of the over-centralized Soviet economy or provide the incentives for more efficient employment of labor and capital, either in the factory or on the farm.

Although Mr. Gorbachev talks of the need for "radical reform" he has moved cautiously in making organizational changes in contrast to his sweeping personnel shifts and seems to place his hopes for improvement on massive new government investment in state-of-the-art machinery.

Having learned from Nikita Khrushchev's abrupt removal from office by the ruling party elite, Mr. Gorbachev is not ready to challenge the special privileges of the *nomenklatura* that rules Russia. Nor does he dare to open up to market forces the system of centralized control that allocates resources.

The best guess of the American Kremlin-watchers remains that he will tinker with the system rather than radically reform it and therefore fail to catch up with the technological revolution in the West.

In Eastern Europe, the general secretary has not yet elaborated a complete policy, but his basis message to the Communist leaders of the satellite states is clear. He is telling them in blunt language that there will be no more free lunches, that they are going to have to pay more in high-quality exports to Russia, and that they will have to toe the line on foreign policy.

Forced to pay higher prices for Soviet oil than the world market demands, and no longer free to sell their best-quality goods to the West, the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe are caught in the kind of economic squeeze that in the past has often spelled big trouble.

There is in fact a surprising and significant consensus among the experts that there is a high probability of a blowup somewhere in Eastern Europe early on during Mr. Gorbachev's tenure.

While Poland remains under uneasy control by Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, the potential for upheaval exists in the succession crises that loom ahead in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Even the Romanians are in such desperate economic straits under a corrupt regime that a popular explosion there is possible. U.S. officials who have dealt with Mr. Gorbachev are convinced he would suppress such a revolt with brutal force, but it would destroy his carefully cultivated image of enlightened statesmanship.

Toward the countries of the Third World, the new Soviet leader has adopted a policy best described as "muscular consolidation." His Party Congress address is notable for its omission of any reference to national liberation movements, and he seems anxious not to take on the burden of supporting new client states.

But as CIA Director William Casey explained in a Washington speech this week, those radical states that are already in the Soviet orbit, such as Afghanistan, Angola, and Nicaragua, are being heavily armed by the Soviets against the guerrilla forces that threaten them. There is no evidence of a Soviet willingness to withdraw from these commitments.

This determined escalation of Soviet-directed military pressure on the mujahideen in Afghanistan, on the UNITA guerrillas in Angola, and on the "contras" in Nicaragua means that Mr. Gorbachev intends to consolidate and hold on to what he's got. The success of the Reagan doctrine in assisting these guerrilla movements to survive and eventually to prevail depends on the administration's ability to develop consistent bipartisan-majority support in the U.S. Congress for the necessary covert funding.

Finally, even the most skeptical Kremlin-watchers admit that real shifts in Soviet policy are possible because Mr. Gorbachev, for internal reasons, badly needs some improvement in the international environment so he can relax the arms competition and gain Soviet access to Western credits and high technology. So far, he has tried to get what he wants without paying for it.

But if the United States can maintain its defense spending, keep its allies in line, and prevent the leakage of high technology, there is the possibility of eventually engaging in real bargaining with Mr. Gorbachev on arms control and regional issues at some future summit.

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